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Is Mill an Anti-Hedonist?

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0. Introduction

In this paper, I will critically examine David Brink's claim that Mill is not a hedonist, and argue that in fact Mill is a hedonist. By considering the doctrine of higher pleasures, Brink concludes that Mill does not accept the claim that pleasant mental states are only goods for human beings, and for Mill higher pleasures are activities rather than mental states. However, my view is that even higher pleasures are comfortable mental states, though they are qualitatively different from lower ones.⁽¹⁾ In the first part of my paper, I will introduce Brink's claim that according to Mill higher pleasures are activities. In the second, I will examine Brink's argument for his claim and suggest the problems in it. In the third, I will see Brink's criticism of the hedonist reading of Mill does not work. This finally leads to the discussion of our hedonist reading of Mill.

1. Why higher pleasures are activities for Brink?

In his paper "Mill's Deliberative Utilitarianism," Brink explicitly claims that higher pleasures are activities for Mill:

On the more objective reading, "pleasure" refers to nonmental items, such as actions, activities, and pursuits that do or can cause pleasurable mental states. Higher pleasures are those activities or pursuits that exercise our higher (e.g. intellectual) capacities. (Brink, 1992, pp. 72-3)

Brink admits that this reading "may sound less natural than the mental state reading," but at the same time he is sure that he has good reasons for that:

First, he often does use "pleasure" to refer to activities and pursuits, especially those that typically cause pleasurable mental states – we might call these "objective pleasures." (Compare the way in which someone might refer to sexual activity as a bodily pleasure.) As we shall see in Section 4, in the second part of the "proof" of the principle of utility Mill counts music, virtue, and health as pleasures (U, IV 5). These are objective pleasures. And elsewhere in his discussion of higher pleasures in chapter II, Mill equates a person's pleasures with his

“indulgences” (II 7) and with his “mode of existence” (II 8). Here too he must be discussing objective pleasures. Second, when Mill introduces higher pleasures (II 4) he is clearly discussing, among other things, intellectual pursuits and activities. He claims to be arguing that what the quantitative hedonist defends as extrinsically more valuable is (intellectual) activities and pursuits, not mental states. Finally, in paragraphs 4 through 8 Mill links the preferences of competent judges and the greater value of the objects of their preferences. But among the things Mill thinks competent judges would prefer are activities and pursuits. And, in particular, in commenting on the passage quoted above (II 5), Mill writes:

Now it is an unquestionable fact that those who are equally acquainted with and equally capable of appreciating and enjoying both do give a most marked preference to the *manner of existence* which employs their higher faculties. (U, II 6; italics [Brink’s])

Here Mill is identifying the higher pleasures with activities and pursuits that exercise our higher capacities. (Brink, 1992, pp. 73-4)

In brief, first, for Brink, the term “pleasure” does not necessarily refer to a mental state. We might be able to call music performance as “musical pleasure.” Second, Mill seems to take intellectual pursuits and activities to be intrinsically good. Third, when Mill claims that people would prefer higher pleasures over lower pleasures, he seems to identify the higher pleasures with activities. I will examine these three points considering the quoted passages in the *Utilitarianism*.

2. Are higher pleasures really activities?

Concerning the first point, Brink suggests some passages in which Mill takes pleasures to be activities even when he does not discuss higher pleasures. Now we have to see the passage in which Mill discusses music, virtue and health:

The principle of utility does not mean that any given pleasure, as music, for instance, or any given exemption from pain, as for example health, are to be looked upon as means to a collective something termed happiness, and to be desired on that account. They are desired and desirable in and for themselves; besides being means, they are a part of the end. Virtue, according to the utilitarian doctrine, is not naturally and originally part of the end, but it is

capable of becoming so; and in those who love it disinterestedly it has become so, and is desired and cherished, not as a means to happiness, but as a part of their happiness. (U, IV 5 = Ryan 309)

Mill is talking about a given pleasure as music and a given exemption from pain as health. Probably we should take note of the word “as.” It might be possible that Mill is thinking about a given pleasure that results from performing a piece of music. Also, Mill might think about a given exemption from pain (a comfortable mental state) that is a result of a bodily condition (i.e. health). If it is the case, Mill just claims that comfortable mental states resulting from music and health are to be desired for themselves. Thus the passage does not show that pleasures must be activities there. Now we see the passage in which Mill discusses indulgences:

Men often, from infirmity of character, make their election for the nearer good, through they know it to be the less valuable; and this no less when the choice is between two bodily pleasures, than when it is between bodily and mental. They pursue sensual indulgences to the injury of health, though perfectly aware that health is the greater good. (U, II 7 = Ryan 281)

Two notes: First, I am not sure that Mill supposes “pleasures” and “indulgences” are identical here. Mill may be just claiming that people are likely to pursue comfortable but lower mental states, on the one hand, and activities of drinking alcohol beverages, on the other. Second, even if “pleasures” and “indulgences” refer to the same item, it is possible that “indulgences” refers to pleasant mental states rather than activities. If so, then we do not have to understand “pleasure” as activities in this passage. Next, we shall see the passage in which Mill takes pleasures to be one’s modes of existence:

On a question which is the best worth having of two pleasures, or which of two modes of existence is the most grateful to the feelings, apart from its moral attributes and from its consequences, the judgement of those who are qualified by knowledge of both, or, if they differ, that of the majority among them, must be admitted as final. (U, II 8 = Ryan 282)

According to the tradition of early modern metaphysics, “mode” can mean any state of a thing. For example, in the *Principles of Philosophy* Descartes states that “we employ the term mode when

we are thinking of a substance as being affected or modified” (A.T.8a 26 = Cottingham 211). Also, one chapters of Locke’s essay is dedicated to “modes of pleasure and pain” (Essay 2. 20). Naturally, a mental state is a kind of mode in this context. Hume also has the section of “modes and substances” (Treatise 1.1.6). So, it is entirely possible that Mill just supposes that comfortable mental states are modes of one’s mind or existence, given that Mill must have learned a lot from his empiricist ancestors. If so, again, we don’t have to take “pleasures” to be activities here.

Concerning the second point, let us see how Mill introduces higher pleasures:

But there is no known Epicurean theory of life which does not assign to the pleasures of the intellect, of the feelings and imagination, and of the moral sentiments, a much higher value as pleasures than to those of mere sensation. It must be admitted, however, that utilitarian writers in general have placed the superiority of mental over bodily pleasures chiefly in the greater permanency, safety, unconstliness etc., of the former – that is, in their circumstantial advantages rather than in their intrinsic nature. And on all these points utilitarians have fully proved their case; but they might have taken the other, and, as it may be called, higher ground, with entire consistency. It is quite compatible with the principle of utility to recognize the fact, that some kinds of pleasure are more desirable and more valuable than others. It would be absurd that while, in estimating all other things, quality is considered as well as quantity, the estimation of pleasures should be supposed to depend on quantity on quantity alone. (U II, 4 = Ryan 279)

Though Brink states that Mill argues that intellectual activities are intrinsically valuable here, I don’t think it is a natural reading of this passage. Mill is talking about “the pleasures of the intellect,” and it is natural to suppose that this term refers to comfortable mental states coming from intellectual activities. Also, we do not have to take “mental pleasure” and “bodily pleasure” as activities, either. Both of them may be mental states resulting from mental or bodily activities.

Concerning the third point, we have to examine the following passage:

Now it is an unquestionable fact that those who are equally acquainted with and equally capable of appreciating and enjoying both do give a most marked preference to the *manner of existence* which employs their higher faculties. (U, II 6; italics Brink’s)

Again, the term “manner of existence” can refer either to a mental state, or to an activity. The

The Latin term “modus” is sometimes translated as “manner,” which may suggest that “manner” and “mode” refers to the same item. And as we have seen, according to the tradition of early modern metaphysics, “mode” can mean any state of mind. So it may be the case that “manner of existence” refers to a comfortable mental state rather than an activity.

So far, we do not have enough reasons to agree with the claim that higher pleasures are activities, given that all of three points suggested by Brink are not fully convincing.

3. Why is the hedonistic reading problematic for Brink?

But the discussion in the previous section might not be enough to undermine Brink’s interpretation, since he also introduces some problems concerning the opposite position, according to which Mill is a hedonist. In this section, I will see these points suggested by Brink, and still argue that they do not fully undermine the reading that Mill is a hedonist.

Brink tries to find a possible hedonistic reading of Mill for the purpose of showing that it is not a plausible interpretation. Let us see the reading proposed by Brink:

But perhaps we can salvage a hedonistic reading of the higher pleasures doctrine. This interpretation concedes that Mill’s doctrine of higher and lower pleasures draws a distinction between kinds of activities. But this distinction may help him distinguish different kinds of pleasure (the mental state) if he picks out qualitatively different mental states in terms of different sorts of activities associated with them. On this interpretation, Mill might claim that higher pleasures, pleasures caused by higher activities, are intrinsically more valuable than lower pleasures, pleasures caused by lower activities. (Brink, 1992, p. 74)

Brink distinguishes pleasant mental states from activities and suggests that pleasant mental states are the only goods in this reading. Higher pleasures are produced by higher activities like political activities, profound researches and appreciations of great works of art, while lower pleasures are produced by lower activities like indulging in alcoholic beverages. One problem of this reading is that higher pleasures may not be independent items given that they are causally dependent upon the higher activities, and in a sense they need these activities as constituents (Brink, 1992, p. 74). But Brink admits that this problem cannot undermine the hedonistic reading, since we can still conceive of the whole in which the parts (the higher activity and the pleasant mental state produced by that activity) coexist, and see these parts are independent of each other in the sense that they are

ontologically distinct (Brink, 1992, p. 75). However, Brink eventually refuses the hedonistic reading, since he found three problems in it. The first is the following:

...[E]ven if there are qualitatively different kinds of pleasures, because of their different kinds of constituent activities, the hedonist should claim that the value of the activities of the compound ought to be proportional to the amount of simple pleasure or preference pleasure associated with them. But Mill denies this; as we have seen, the higher pleasures doctrine asserts that higher “pleasures” are valuable out of proportion to the amount of contentment or pleasure associated with them. (Brink, 1992, p. 75)

I think Brink’s argument depends upon a wrong presupposition that higher pleasures cannot be valuable out of proportion to lower ones if both of them are mental states. It is possible that a higher pleasure that is produced by a higher activity is “valuable out of proportion” to lower pleasures. We do not have to hold that for Mill higher activities like intellectual pursuits are incomparably more valuable than lower pleasures. Higher activities might be extremely (but extrinsically) valuable only because they produce noble and comfortable mental states that are incomparably (and, of course, intrinsically) valuable than lower pleasures.

The second problem with the hedonistic reading is the following:

...[E]ven if Mill can claim that intellectual pleasures (the mental states) are qualitatively different from voluptuous pleasures (the mental states), because of their constituent activities, he would have no hedonistic ground for asserting, as he does, that the former are intrinsically superior to the latter. For one kind of pleasure to be a superior pleasure to another is presumably for it to contain more simple pleasure or preference pleasure. But whether this is true of intellectual pleasure vis-à-vis voluptuous pleasures must be a contingent psychological matter and so could not establish the intrinsic superiority of intellectual pleasures. (Brink, 1992, pp. 75-6)

Here Brink considers the possibility that there are two qualitatively different comfortable mental states. They are higher and lower pleasures. But eventually he concludes that it is not possible since one comfortable mental state cannot be intrinsically superior to another. Brink seems to presuppose that any hedonist must accept Bentham’s framework, according to which one pleasure can be more

valuable than others only on the basis of its intensity and duration. But Mill introduces another dimension in his evaluation of pleasure, namely, its quality. Once Mill introduced this dimension, he can conclude that higher comfortable mental states are more valuable only because they are qualitatively different from lower ones.

Now we will see the final reason why Brink refuses the hedonistic reading:

Third, any version of hedonism must claim that the only intrinsic goods are pleasures (the mental states). But Mill denies this. As I have argued, his use of “pleasure” in his statement of the higher pleasures doctrine refers to certain activities and pursuits, rather than the mental states in which they are constituents or the mental states that they cause. If, as he claims, these “pleasures” are intrinsically more valuable than others, it is the activities and pursuits themselves that are intrinsically valuable. And this makes a difference. Higher activities can fail to produce simple pleasure or preference pleasure, even if when they do, there exists a higher pleasure that has the associated activity as a constituent. If activities are valuable only as parts of higher pleasures, they will not be valuable when they do not produce pleasure. However, if, as Mills seems to claim, the activities themselves are valuable, then they have value when they do not produce pleasure and their value is independent of the pleasure they cause when they do produce pleasure (the pleasure, of course, representing additional value). (Brink, 1992, p. 76)

But we have seen in Section 2, the term “pleasure” may refer to comfortable mental states rather than activities. So we do not have to conclude that activities are intrinsically good for Mill, and therefore Mill is not a hedonist.

4. Mill as a hedonist

So far we have seen that Brink’s arguments do not undermine the hedonistic reading of Mill. Then is there any positive reason to consider Mill as a hedonist? I will suggest several passages in which Mill supports a hedonistic view that pleasures (comfortable mental states) are the goods. Brink also takes note of the following passage:

The creed which accepts as the foundations of morals “utility” or the “greatest happiness principle” holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness; wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. By happiness is intended pleasure and the

absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain and the privation of pleasure. (U, II 2 = Ryan 278; Brink, 1992, p. 70)

Mill explicitly contrasts pleasure with pain. If “pleasure” refers to an activity, it is difficult to understand what “pain” means. It is natural to suppose that “pain” refers to an uncomfortable mental state. Thus we can reasonably conclude that “pleasure” probably refers to a mental state here. Since this is a general statement concerning his utilitarianism, it is natural to suppose that Mill is a hedonist.

Also, we can find that kind of general statements in other passages:

According to the Greatest Happiness Principle, as above explained, the ultimate end, which reference to and for the sake of which all other things are desirable (whether we are considering our own good or that of other people), is an existence exempt as far as possible from pain, and as rich as possible in enjoyments, both in point of quantity and quality; the test of quality, and the rule for measuring it against quantity, being the preference felt by those who, in their opportunities of experience, to which must be added their habits of self-consciousness and self-observation, are best furnished with the means of comparison. (U, II 9 = Ryan 283)

Mill explicitly discusses “the ultimate end,” which is supposed to be intrinsically good. An exemption from pain is one of the ultimate ends as an enjoyment is. Thus, after the discussion of higher pleasure, Mill still reiterates his hedonistic principle, according to which comfortable mental states are ultimate goods:

Of this the philosophers who have taught that happiness is the end of life were as fully aware as those who taunt them. The happiness which they meant was not a life of rapture; but moments of such, in an existence made up of few and transitory pains, many and various pleasures, with a decided predominance of the active over the passive, and having as the foundation of the whole, not to expect more from life than it is capable of bestowing. A life thus composed, to those who have been fortunate enough to obtain it, has always appeared worthy of the name of happiness. (U, II 11 = Ryan 284)

In this passage Mill tries to explain the traditional doctrine of happiness in his own way. For him, a happy life is generally not with a lot of indulgences that are unstable and not likely to endure.

It is with many and various pleasures and free from a lot of transitory pains. Mill does not succeed the distinction of happiness (eudaimonia) and pleasure (hedone) from Plato and Aristotle. Rather, Mill is trying to explain what a happy life is in his hedonistic framework.

Concluding Remark

To summarize: In Section 1, I shortly introduced Brink's interpretation that Mill is an anti-hedonist. In Section 2, we have seen that Brink's arguments to show that higher pleasures are activities are in fact not persuasive. In Section 3, I argued that Brink's criticism of the hedonist reading does not work, either. It is still possible to read Mill as a hedonist. In Section 4, I suggested further reasons to believe that Mill is a hedonist on the basis of some passages.

Note

(1) Wendy Donner states that Brink conflates what things have value with what are the good-making properties of these things which produce their value (Donner 1998, p. 266). For Donner, though intellectual activities have the good-making property to produce valuable mental states, they are not intrinsically good.

References

[Abbreviations]

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- Cottingham** Rene Descartes: *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*. vol.1 Trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch. New York :Cambridge University Press.
- Essay** John Locke: *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*. Cited by book, chapter and section.
- Ryan** J.S. Mill: *Utilitarianism and other essays J.S. Mill and Jeremy Bentham* Ed. by Alan Ryan Penguin Books, 1987.
- Treatise** David Hume: *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Cited by book, part and section.
- U** J.S. Mill: *Utilitarianism* Cited by chapter and section.

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